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## ABSTRACT

This essay, based on the personal experiences of a professional librarian, who is also a Vietnam veteran, looks at why Vietnam veterans are a minority in higher education and the misconceptions that surround them. The lack of contact with actual veterans by administrators in many institutions of higher education is noted, and the paper goes on to identify various reasons for this. Among them are the regulations which at the time allowed draft deferment for enrollment in graduate school, the large numbers of soldiers drawn from working-class neighborhoods, the disproportionate number of minorities drafted, and the reduction in government benefits for veterans since World War II. The librarian's own experience in college following service in the war is recounted and the continuing threat of the draft and common misconceptions about the war are noted. Particular emphasis is placed on the lack of understanding within higher education about the war and its veterans due to their underrepresentation on campuses. (JB)

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AN UNFAMILIAR MINORITY: VIETNAM VETERANS ON CAMPUS

by

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## An Unfamiliar Minority: Vietnam Veterans on Campus

by

David Drake

Some years ago, I interviewed for a position with a major metropolitan community college. My interviewer, a young and newly-appointed dean, noted from my resume that I had served in the armed forces. I generally include my military service on my resume simply to explain where those three years of my life went; otherwise it is irrelevant to my credentials. The young woman was curious, however, and asked if I had served in Vietnam. When I replied that I had, her eyes widened and with mouth agape in wonder, she said, "And you're still all right!" She then launched into an extended monologue about a movie she had recently seen featuring a drug-addicted, uncontrollably violent Vietnam veteran. How nice it was, she gushed, that I hadn't ended up like that.

I suppose I should have told her I was offended by her remarks, as in fact I was, but instead I smiled weakly and let them pass. I wanted the job badly. I didn't get it, but the young woman is now a vice-chancellor.

The dean did not intend to insult me; quite the contrary, in her mind she was extolling me for not having turned out like the rest of those poor guys. Her attitude, familiar to me by then, undoubtedly resulted from a lack of any genuine contact with the war or its veterans.

Vietnam veterans have been rare in academe, whether as

student or professor. I believe our underrepresentation can be attributed to three factors. First, during the early stages of the war, enrollment in graduate school provided one a deferment from the draft. Although this means of deferment was later lifted, it probably served as the primary incentive for more than a few academic careers while simultaneously keeping the scholars out of Southeast Asia. Second, the selective nature of the draft ensured that the majority of soldiers were drawn from working-class neighborhoods where the notion of attending college was anomalous at best. Minorities, traditionally lagging in college attendance, were drafted and served in Vietnam in numbers disproportionate to whites. Finally, the G.I. Bill which brought millions of World War II veterans to college classrooms had, by the time of the Vietnam conflict, been severely reduced in the scope and nature of its benefits. As a percentage of all who served, far fewer Vietnam veterans attended college than their counterparts of World War II, resulting in a dearth of such individuals on either side of the lectern.

When I left Vietnam and the military in 1970, I enrolled in my local community college almost immediately. The transition was at times uncomfortable; although I was only a few years older than most of the younger students, I often felt as distant from them as an octogenarian. They seemed to me extremely naive and somewhat spoiled; for their part, they probably perceived me as aloof and taciturn. It was difficult to make friends at school.

In those years, of course, awareness of the war was omnipresent on college campuses, even the relatively complacent ones in Texas. Classroom discussions frequently swung around to the subject, as did hallway conversations. I soon learned not to bring up my service, as the mention of it inevitably caused awkward silences. Even worse, I might be pelted with questions such as how many confirmed kills had I registered, had I used heroin, or how could I justify participating in an immoral war. I was more bewildered than angered by such questions, not knowing then that most of them were motivated by adolescent curiosity rather than moral resentment. I grew particularly tired of what I called the Island Question. Among Texas college students there was an incredible myth, which I was often asked to confirm, that a large number of soldiers in Vietnam had contracted an incurable venereal disease which caused irreversible insanity. The victims of the disease, so the story went, had been quarantined on an island off Vietnam to spend the rest of their days in frothing madness, while they were reported to their families as missing in action. Don't laugh; this story was widely believed in a time when the government routinely lied about the war.

Like most Vietnam veterans, I felt then and now that the war was a misguided and incompetently managed effort. While most of us served out of some vague sense of obligation, we could take little pride in our service and were often embarrassed by it in the anti-military environment of the

college or university. Early in my freshman year, I stopped trying to make the point that I, too, was against the war, all the more so because of my firsthand experience with it. I would sit silently during classroom debates about the war, not wishing to be miscast in the role of apologist simply on the basis of my service.

The draft still loomed threateningly for male students then. I was often present during or overheard arguments over the best way to avoid conscription and extend one's deferment. "If you tell them you wet the bed," one fellow offered, "they won't draft you." Another said that if you drank liquid soap just prior to your examination, you would flunk the physical. I was always more amused than offended by this type of talk and had visions of rows of reluctant inductees with soap-filled stomachs retching bubbles like Lawrence Welk's machine. Even today, I occasionally hear some of my colleagues swap humorous stories about how they managed to avoid service. I still find such stories amusing and I do not, as many of them assume, resent their lack of service, but I sense that they are uncomfortable with my having served.

If there is any predominant sentiment that has been evoked over the years by my being a Vietnam veteran in academe, it is indeed the sense of unease it seems to cause others, not me. I'm not sure why this is so, but I suspect it has to do with guilt feelings on the part of those who did not serve, however sincere they may have been in their opposition to the war. Christopher Buckley addressed this point in his

essay "Viet Guilt." When he was of draft age and the conflict in Vietnam was at its height, Buckley deliberately and successfully flunked his Army physical. Afterwards he celebrated with friends on campus. Twelve years later he visited the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. and was moved by the sight of a middle-aged Marine weeping before the etched names of the dead. Buckley's guilt surfaced and he immediately left the grounds, feeling himself an intruder.

That experience led Buckley to write his essay, in which he notes that during the period between the signing of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution on August 7, 1964 and April 30, 1975, the day Saigon fell to the Communists, 53 million Americans came of drafting age. Of those, 11 million served. Fewer than 3 million went to Indochina. According to his research, that left 42 million Americans who didn't serve. More than 16 million men were deferred, exempted, disqualified, or evaded the draft. Buckley's conclusion was that 80 percent of the Vietnam generation did not participate in the "dominant event of their time."

I have no figures to support this, but based on my own experience I believe that in academe that figure of 80 percent would approach or even exceed 90 to 95 percent. For those of my generation who chose academic careers, it seems, the overwhelming majority had no personal connection with Vietnam. As I stated earlier, in no way do I resent anyone's lack of service, nor do I exonerate myself for having served. I am bothered instead by a larger issue.

Underrepresentation inevitably leads to a lack of understanding, just as unfamiliarity fosters a lack of empathy for the persons or group unknown to the beholder. Vietnam veterans in academe are at least twice removed from the mainstream by virtue of their small numbers and for having participated in an event that was overwhelmingly unpopular among the vast majority of their peers.

Colleges and universities, by design or default, are our traditional custodians of culture, whatever that might mean. If we are charged with protecting the truth, it follows that we must aggressively refute misinformation. This obviously includes the denial of stereotypes as demeaning, discrediting, and inaccurate. Yet I find that the conventional myths about Vietnam veterans persist as vigorously in academic circles as on the small and large screens. I have to believe that this is because higher education hardly knows us; there are so few of us here.

If our numbers were greater in the classrooms and administrative offices, you would know us better. You would appreciate our ordinariness and our lack of anger. Most importantly, in revising your own view of us you could help us repudiate the stereotypes which still abound among your students, a generation raised on Rambo.

Over the years, I have occasionally been invited as a guest speaker before students whose only concepts of the Vietnam conflict and its veterans have been derived from incredibly innacurate and exploitive movies and television

programs. I generally accept these invitations, hoping that if I can't dispel the negative images I can at least confuse them. It seems to work. The students are genuinely puzzled by how little the bland, balding librarian before them resembles the Vietnam veterans they have seen portrayed in the popular culture. Questions, when they come at all, typically dwell on atrocities or drug usage, just as they did twenty years ago. They always seem disappointed that I downplay the importance of such things and refuse to be explicit about them.

Since all Vietnam vets have passed or are soon to pass our fortieth year, our numbers in academe will not grow. I would then ask that you know us for what we are, as well as for what we are not. We are as conventional and unconventional as you are; we seek the same ends in our personal and professional lives as you do. We are not disturbed or bitter in any greater measure than the general population, in our out of academia. It is not our wish to be patronized, nor do we expect (or appreciate) belated laurels.

As members of an invisible minority, Vietnam veterans in higher education parallel other minorities in our goal to be unconditionally accepted on merit alone without the stigma of stereotype. As with other minorities, we will probably not see full realization of this goal in our lifetime. Unlike other minorities, when our generation dies, there will be no more of us.